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Two Women From the Philippines

MANILA—The dramatic developments in the Philippines, as chronicled by the CIA and recounted by some of the principal participants, have revolved around two disparate women, Imelda Marcos and Corazon Aquino.

The former, a woman of uncommon beauty and ruthless ambition, is described in secret CIA reports as the "steel butterfly," the "flaming Imelda," the "Evita Peron of the Philippines." She conspired behind the scenes to rule the Philippines.

The latter, a woman of quiet dignity and modest tastes, would have been content to remain "just a housewife." She is described by associates as "too honest" and "too idealistic" for the dirty game of politics. Yet she has been catapulted into the presidency that Imelda Marcos coveted.

In the words of the CIA, Imelda Romualdez was "born a poor cousin of landed aristocracy," with a terrible "thirst for wealth, power and public acclaim." She first managed to attract the public spotlight as a beauty queen. "Although she has had little formal education," says the CIA, "she is cunning."

Corazon Cojuangco, in contrast, was born into wealth, brought up on a sugar-cane plantation and educated at an elite college in New York. She was a shy, delicate, well-bred young woman skilled in languages. But beneath the silken exterior was a character of steel.

The two women married political rivals, Ferdinand Marcos and Benigno Aquino. In time, Ferdinand was elected president, and the Marcoses moved into Malacanang. Reported the CIA: "The Marcos marriage is essentially a business and political partnership, but no one is sure just how close this working relationship is. At times, the two clearly compete with one another. At others, the president will give in to her."

After two elected terms, Marcos tore up the constitution, seized personal power and jailed Benigno Aquino on trumped-up charges. Under U.S. pressure, Marcos eventually freed but exiled his rival.

Ninoy and Cory, as the Aquinos were called by everyone, settled in the Boston suburbs. She continued to keep in Ninoy's shadow, content to be a housewife, raising their five children while the men talked politics.

Back in Manila, Imelda was tossing money around like confetti at a New Year's Eve party.

She also became engrossed in political manipulations. The CIA reported that she had her sights on the presidency. "In the event of President Marcos' death," predicted the CIA, "his wife would doubtless make a bid to replace him."

Politics came to a boil inside Malacanang as Ferdinand Marcos' health deteriorated. According to the CIA, Imelda intensified her political activities and struck a secret alliance with the army's chief of staff, Gen. Fabian Ver.

In 1983 whispers reached Ninoy Aquino that his ailing rival might not survive much longer. The time had come, he decided, for him to return to the Philippines and make his bid for the presidency. He had no plan to overthrow Marcos but wanted to be available to succeed him.

From the Defense Intelligence Agency came word that Imelda Marcos arranged a secret meeting with Ninoy in May 1983. She reportedly warned him "that assassins might await him" if he returned.

He disregarded the warning and, shortly thereafter, flew back to the Philippines. He Secret intelligence reports suggest cautiously that he may have been murdered on orders from Imelda.

Apparently, President Marcos had no advance knowledge of the assassination plot. Filipino columnist Teodoro Valencia was present at Malacanang when Marcos learned that his rival had been shot. According to Valencia, Marcos realized the gun that killed Aquino would backfire against himself. Valencia told me Marcos was so furious he began throwing objects at his aides.

Cory Aquino returned to the Philippines to arrange her husband's funeral. She had nothing else in mind, family members told me. She had such an electrifying effect upon the people, however, that opposition leaders persuaded her to step into her slain husband's shoes.

To appease an angry public, Marcos called an election, which he rigged. Protesters began pouring into Manila until they clogged the streets. Two army commands joined this astonishing, spontaneous demonstration. Cory Aquino was lifted to power on the shoulders of the populace.

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